



Michigan Council of Trout Unlimited

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Testimony on Water Withdrawal Legislation – February 27, 2008

House Committee on Great Lakes and Environment

Hello Madam Chair and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My name is Bryan Burroughs, I am the Executive Director of the Michigan Council of Trout Unlimited and I speak to you today on behalf of all of Trout Unlimited. We have 23 local chapters and 7,000 members in Michigan, and 150,000 members nationwide. We are a grassroots organization whose mission is to conserve, protect, and restore coldwater fisheries and their watersheds. With a mission like this, it should come as no surprise that we do not support any degradation of our precious natural resources. Our valuable public natural resources, unique assets to Michigan, should not suffer degradation to benefit future private commercial interests. Water can be used without negative impact.

For the past two years, our law prevents new large quantity water withdrawals from having an adverse resource impact on trout streams, and starting tomorrow, extends to all of our waters. The dictionary definition of “adverse” is “unfavorable or opposed”. What level of resource impact wouldn’t be unfavorable to all citizens? No impact. Trout Unlimited opposes the idea that future commercial interests might have a right to degrade public resources. Further, if society might have to decide whether to allow damage to public resources to allow for future commercial ventures – shouldn’t there be a chance for public input concerning the benefits and costs of those societal tradeoffs?

Coldwaters are our highest quality streams and are the most prone to degradation. They form the economic backbone of northern Michigan communities, through property taxes, recreation and tourism expenditures, through licensed fishing guides, shops and lodges, and canoe liveries. They are also a unique and fundamental aspect of the high-quality of life we have here in Michigan – our way forward into a new economy. A recent study estimated that 500 million dollars, in direct spending, is supplied by fishing recreation in the Driftless Area trout streams of Wisconsin and Minnesota. This area pales in comparison to the scope and quality of groundwater fed streams in Michigan, and also does not salmon and steelhead fisheries like ours do. If we conducted an economic evaluation of what our coldwater fisheries are worth to our economy it would doubtlessly be in the billions of dollars per year. Past legislation has recognized, grandfathered, and protected current “water users” because of their economic investment, but where is the protection and support for the current water users with economic investments that benefit from thriving fish populations and using water in its place?

To conserve, protect and restore coldwater fisheries and their watersheds

A proposed limit of <1% reduction in thriving fish abundance in coldwaters still equates to 15-22% of summer low flow water volume available for removal. Our members are concerned that this too may be too much, even if current models predict it to have no impact. With climate change and almost every other environmental change working to warm our coldwaters, removing this “surplus” water will remove the streams’ resilience to warming factors, and we will push healthy coldwaters to the edge of being able to support coldwater fish. In the spirit of compromise, we accepted that until the science improves, this is the framework we must work within. But where our models tell us that significant amounts of water are available for use without immediate impact – why would we allow greater degradation of the resource?

A cursory review of the very recently released House Bill 2365, a substitute for HB 5069, is encouraging. We of course do not prefer all components of this legislation. In particular, we do not support the 5% reduction in fish abundance to Cold-transitional streams. However, we understand that many components of this are the result of compromise, and we respect your efforts working towards that. Overall, we support the work of this bill to achieve the greatest level of protection for our aquatic resources.